



WAVES OF RESISTANCE

Feminist artist Nikki Luna discusses the parallelism of violence against women and the threat to national sovereignty.

BY ELIZABETH RUTH DEYRO

Feminism may be one of the most widely discussed topics across various venues today, from social media to the academe, but it remains utterly misconstrued, rendering the impression that it engenders controversy. A social movement whose origin dates back to the 19th century, the core of feminism is to move women's rights and gender equality forward. Through the three waves of feminism, women have fought for and gradually realized the rights they have been deprived of: the right to labor

and equal wage, education, suffrage, and bodily autonomy, among others.

There are still myriad issues that continue to impede women's rights. Filipinos have seen a strong microcosm of such hindrance ever since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in 2016. The culture of machismo and misogyny perpetuated by the President and his administration puts women in a vulnerable state, but such threats only breed the toughest of feminists, expressing their disapproval of the administration's anti-women behavior through clear-cut methods of activism,

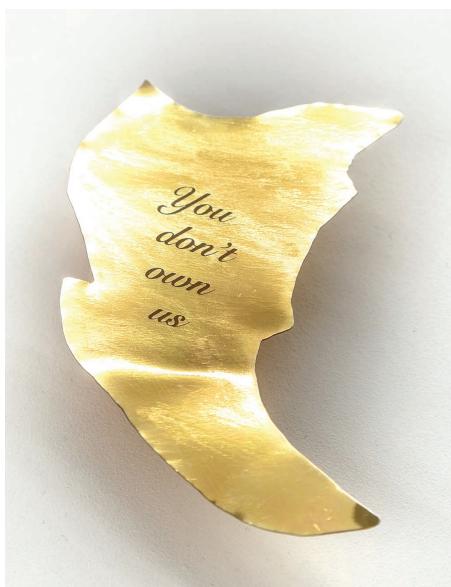
discursive studies of repercussions from this incumbent regime, as well as introspective and thought-provoking art.

Nikki Luna utilizes her craft as an artist to bridge gaps in the public understanding of women's rights. She identifies as a feminist and women's rights activist, and delves into sociopolitical discourse on women's issues through her artistic practice. She specializes in weaving communities' narratives into her work, "recontextualizing their experiences from a place of oppression into a position of power."

IMAGES COURTESY OF NIKKI LUNA.

With an inherently and explicitly political oeuvre, Luna is unapologetic in using art as a tool for activism, asserting that fostering conversations through her art is her “obligation,” both as an artist and woman. Previous work include the likes of *Lady of the House* (2019), exhibited at the Cairo Biennale in Egypt, which explored the plight of undocumented Filipina domestic workers in the country, and the 2017 Finale Art File solo exhibition *Violence Need Not Be Bloody For It To Be Validated As Such*, which tackled the state-sanctioned War on Drugs and how it victimizes women from lower-income communities in the Philippines.

“Art and activism can go hand and hand, allowing [often disregarded] political conversations to be presented differently in the public sphere. Somehow people are more open; they can grasp the issue [when they look] at it through the lens of an artist. I think, more than limitations, we must recognize its power to change corrupt systems and unjust social structures,” Luna says.

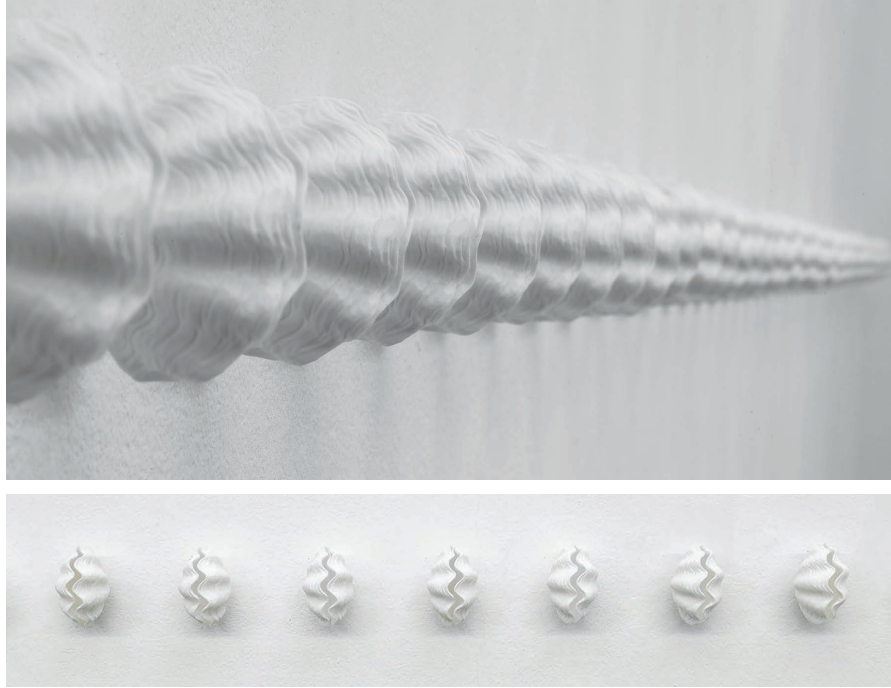


Her first for the year is a solo exhibition titled *Rape of Seas*, which ran from 17 January to 27 February at unttd contemporary in Vienna, Austria. The exhibition is a mixed media collection that brings to light pressing concerns on the tug-of-

war over the West Philippine Sea, and the incumbent Philippine administration’s apparent passivity to the Chinese government’s attempts to undermine Philippine sovereignty. Luna compares the situation to violence against women, a parallelism that



(THIS PHOTO AND OPPOSITE PAGE) Installation view of *Rape of Seas*. (TOP, FROM LEFT) “Panacot Shoal (You don’t own us)” and “Panacot Shoal (Don’t be an enabler)”.



(ABOVE, FROM LEFT) "Consent"; "Scars on the Reef".

seeks to remind Filipinos of the crucial implications of this issue.

"The Filipino people are not giving their consent to the President's enabling of the rape of their seas, the destruction of the environment, and the persecution of the people. He has cast his own nation as the victim, blaming her for her own weakness when he says that the Philippines has little power against China—therefore sit back and just take it. But she will not be silenced. Through art, street, or diplomatic means, the protest is raised: this sea is our sea," Luna declares in her artist statement for the exhibition.

The comparison is consistently reintroduced and discussed through featured works such as "Scars on the Reef," a row of clam shells installed on a white wall, all of which were measured to the size of a vagina and resembling "scarred hymen."

Gold pieces shaped to look like the Panacot Shoal and the Kalayaan Island reefs take viewers back to "centuries before the reefs were seized and irrevocably transformed into military installations," a state of innocence before the violation that can only be retrieved in bitter nostalgia. But the silver engravings featuring the words of rape victims and violated women serve as a rallying cry demanding justice.

"Consent," a framed dress made of fishing net sewn by a Scarborough

fisherman's wife, serves as reminder of how livelihoods are directly affected by the situation, and aims to convey that "allowing this massive exploitation is another manifestation of the patriarchy; the President's vulgar words, in jest they may be, are poisoning the very waters he claims to rule."

Similar to pieces Luna worked on for previous exhibitions, two white flags – titled "Waging a People's War" and "Waging a Woman's War" – incorporates quotes from President Duterte's speeches where he expressed a sense of indifference to national sovereignty or disrespect for women.

Aside from recently earning her Master in Art and Education from Goldsmiths, University of London at the United Kingdom as a British Chevening Scholar, Luna is currently taking up a Master of Arts in Women and Development at the University of the Philippines Diliman, equipping her with an academic viewpoint on feminism, which she believes has better informed her artistic undertakings.

When asked if choosing her niche is a conscious decision or simply a topic she gravitates toward, Luna says she has been committed to the cause for more than a decade. "[I strongly feel that] this is what my art should call attention to," she says, referring to women's rights issues.

"I saw the need to expand initiatives using art as an intervention and to address the role played by art and women's experiences surrounding traditional patriarchal views of femininity, gender, and political violence. As an artist, I hope to strengthen my advocacy in fighting for girls to have an equal footing in society," she notes.

At the height of the Duterte administration's attacks against journalists, activists, women, and political artists, it is but necessary to ask how Luna braves the risks. She shares that she does not really think of the risk. "That might be a bold statement, but it is the truth. I never hold back for anyone. I do not compromise my art so I don't disrupt or discomfort others. I do not care who you are if you're a big collector, gallery, or even the president," she says.

What motivates her amidst threats she receives is her obligation as an artist and the knowledge that she has the "power to retell, shape history, and, more importantly, incorporate the voices from the margins."

Luna believes that "artists should talk about the world we live in, if we can. We must use our art to confront others. It's a vessel to highlight issues, and that is the state of our country and political climate." 🌐

